



Review Paper

Identity Construction in the Narratives of Black Female Writers: A review Article

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ABSTRACT

The term "identity" which refers to one's rights, equality and dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and equal pay, emerged in the United States in the mid-twentieth century in the context of immigration, social change, and emancipator movements. This study examines the distinctive ways in which contemporary black female authors have employed speculative fiction to portray diasporic identities in their female protagonists. The novels examined in this study offer new ways of conceptualizing the connection between cultural trauma and society and ultimately by giving voice, choice and identity, have tried to empower their characters to take a stand against male operation and discover a sense of selfhood. The findings indicate an identity pattern and ways of reshaping the identity, voice and healing during and after traumas distinct to the Afrodiasporic community in the female protagonists.

Keywords: *Narratives, Identity, African diaspora, Black writers, Females*

INTRODUCTION

Identity has long been an important aspect for the narrative studies. The term "identity" refers to one's rights, equality, dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and equal pay (ISWARYA & Kavitha). David Buckingham defines identity based on its Latin root "idem", meaning "the same," and states that: ...the term ... implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time ... our identity is something we uniquely possess: it is what distinguishes us from other people. Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind. When we talk about national identity, cultural identity, or gender identity, for example, we imply that our identity is partly a matter of what we share with other people. Here, identity is about identification with others whom we assume are similar to us (if not exactly the same), at least in some significant ways (Buckingham, 2008).

In Turkle's views, identity refers to the sameness between two qualities, and between a person and his or her persona (Turkle, 2011). The concept of identity emerged in the United States in the mid-twentieth century in the context of immigration, social change, and emancipator movements (Gleason, 1983), and, in this regard, the core themes of the black feminism have been the search for voice and independence (Tamilselvi & Prabha).

As gender identities are constructed by male perception and control (Ardener, 2006), and institutional silencing of female voices and identity are applied across the continent, women writers have constantly strived to make their voices heard. Tulasi (2022) believes that female African writers depict real characters and "replicate the occurrences in the general public"(Tulasi) (Tulasi). Identity therefore becomes an extended range of meanings that express who one is in regard with various roles one takes in social and private relationships. Individuals have multiple identities as far as human being occupies social and public roles as well as the personal ones(Hashemi, Shahabi, & Narafshan, 2022). While individual actions and reactions build the society, society defines the nature of those actions, and therefore, an elaborate system of reciprocal interrelation exists between the individual and society. Friedman believes that identities characterize individuals according to their many positions in society and society and identity are in fact two sides of a coin (Friedman, 2008). Social identities are, thus, shown by such features as race, nationality, and ethnicity and highlight complex involvements with the other members of the group. Clinical psychologists believe that identity is the product of psychological and cultural processes by which humans freely construct and express their senses of self. On the other hand, subjectivity is a term that sociologists use to signify the individuality of each person in relations to power, and how we are subjected by the forces of economics and other social aspects of life. Personal identity is what makes the private experiences of each person and, together with cultural identity which is the result of social interaction, constitutes one's identity in general.

There is a widespread belief that African women for ages have been treated as secondary sex, hence they are submissive and subjugated to men (Emecheta's et al.). Black female writers have therefore felt obliged to have a mission to give their female characters' voice and identity and relieve them of the dissatisfaction and disappointment of being a woman in the manly dominated world. According to Mekgwe, African women's writing when it emerged in the 1970s mainly set out to dispel misrepresentations of African womanhood that were proliferating the African literature at the time.



Feminist practitioners, in effect, in writing and in activism, sought to demonstrate that they were relevant to the African context and in particular that they did not simply seek to emulate their western feminist counterparts (Mekgwe, 2008).

Ghafour believes that in this quest: “they found themselves living two realities, yet felt like they belonged to none”(Binti, 2021), therefore, creating a cultural Black identity has been one of the primary goals of many Black writers and leaders of African movements. In his book “black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose in Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture” Mark Dery asks: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? ” (Dery, 1994).

This article tries to shed light on how Black female writers have used the genre to construct, negotiate, and deconstruct identity, difference, and otherness in novels and short stories depicting human-alien contact, and how their works reflect and spur change in the genre conventions of science fiction. For this aim three novels by Black female writers of different backgrounds and time spans, are analyzed from the stand point of identity construction: *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler, *The rape of Shavi* (1983) by Buchi Emecheta, and *Binti* (2015) by Nnedi Okorafor. These writers seem to be representative of a new generation of authors, who employ bold and strategic stereotypes to expose racism in the genre, popular culture, and society by giving their protagonists a new identity and empowering them by their strong voices. In this regard, they have utilized the genre of science fiction (which previously portrayed white super heroes) and Afrofuturism (a new movement in the African American art scene) in three different time spans (1970s, 1980s, and 2000s. Based on this introduction an answer is sought to this question: How gender identity and voice in post-colonial settings and in more contemporary societies have been explored through the eyes of African female writers of different backgrounds?

METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

The approach used to analyze and read the novels in this study was descriptive information review based on literature review and library approach, and employed a variety of methods, ranging from the conventional technique of textual analysis, to auto/biographical methods, discourse analysis, previous interviews with the authors, library research, internet, and other search methods.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGD

A New approach to Identity Construction by Nnedi Okorafor

The first author analyzed for her different outlook on identity is Nnedi Okorafor, a prolific Nigerian American author, who signifies new image for the African teenager in a new environment, where blackness is technologically managed. Okorafor is a writer that has grabbed the attention of young Black and White readers because of her natural, fantasy style foundation of her stories in the African soil. She draws deep and refreshing elements from the traditions, beliefs, and worldview of the Igbo society, and by doing this changes the black women's representation and encourages her audience to re-think the role Black women play in the superhero books; she casts a black teenage girl as her lead character to combat the stereotypical version of black girls in America (Hashemi 2023).



Yaszek (2015 p.2) suggests that casting lead characters as scientists and engineers who actively create the theories, techniques, and things can change race relations forever ensures futurity for the Black race and the planet (Yaszek, 2015). In *Binti* (Okorafor, 2019) Okorafor reconstructs the portrayal of a young Black female named Binti (meaning girl in the Arabic language) as energetic, self motivated and capable of making meaningful contributions in society with a voice and female identity that advocates for change. Binti is a sixteen year old gifted mathematician, scientist, and inventor, who is awarded a scholarship to study at a prestigious intergalactic university. In fact Binti is represented as a child prodigy and mathematical genius who clearly challenges the stereotypical views of young Black females as poor role models, aggressive, and hyper-sexualized (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017).

Binti becomes a pioneer for space travel and in effect changes her tribe's beliefs and ideals. She would have been a normal timid African teenager had she not been given the opportunity to enter the Oomza University. Okorafor makes a point of saying that only five percent of humans have this chance to study at this university, thus, she considers it an honor to send her lead protagonist to this prestigious university despite the family and society's disapproval. Binti starts reshaping her identity the minute she decides to leave her people and jeopardize her future. She knows that by leaving her tribe she may not ever have the chance to get married and her own people would also shun her, but she stays firm on her decision. Binti has the strength and will to decide to turn her back on family and marriage in order to continue her education; something that is unheard of in her people. She admits that she has never taken such a decision before. Just like any girl in her situation she muses over this move for a while, weighing the strengths and threats that the decision holds. Oomza University remains a symbol of hope and light for Binti, because its focuses on science, and objectivity offers her an exclusive place for expression and development and a place for real discussion on diversity and conflicts. Without a doubt, Binti defies African and Middle Eastern gender stereotypes that cast women and girls as emotional, lacking decision-making ability, and weak. Binti is ambitious even though she was born within a culture that prefers to keep to itself: "We Himba don't travel", (Okorafor, 2015: 8). She turns her back on marriage, admitting that if she remains at home, her prospects of marriage are 100 per cent assured, but going away would diminish her marriage ability to zero level because "no man wanted a woman who had run away" (8).

Okorafor depicts Binti as a complete example of what an Africana woman can and is willing to be. In her blog, she writes: "Africanfuturism is concerned about visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent...and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa" (Okorafor, 2019: n.p.). She gave her all (Body, culture, soul) to save others from a battle that her people had nothing to do with. All she wanted was higher education and high knowledge at the most esteemed University in the Universe. The important factor to consider in the reshaping of the identity process in Binti is the fact that she retains and is proud of her Middle Eastern and African traditions and appearance. In the strange and new world of the university she still wears her hair long and braided and her distinctive African outfit which is represented by long skirts and in a way denounces the western beauty (Hashemi, Shahabi, & Haddad Narafshan, 2022). In fact, Okorafor uses the traditional African culture to reinvent the African identity and forces the women to assert themselves and express a deeper identity and redefine the African female identity as far as their imagination permits.



Identity through the Eyes of a Primitive Black Woman

The second influential black writer whose novel *The Rape of Shavi* was analyzed for this study is the famous Nigerian writer Florence Onyebuchi "Buchi" Emecheta OBE (1944-2017) who immigrated to UK in 1962 (Bromberg, 2020) where she lived most of her life and wrote all her novels. Emecheta's themes of child slavery, motherhood, female independence and freedom through education are the subjects that have acclaimed her as one of the greatest African writers and earned her the recognition from critics and scholarly circles. She once described her stories as "stories of the world, where women face the universal problems of poverty and oppression, and the longer they stay, no matter where they have come from originally, the more the problems become identical" (Emecheta & Nasta, 1988). Her works also explore the tension between tradition and modernity.

The arrival of a group of Europeans fleeing from nuclear holocaust in the fictional African kingdom of Shavi is the pretext to investigate the infringement of African culture and customs through Western intrusion. The violence implied in the title has therefore a more collective and metaphoric meaning as the entire community rather than a single woman is raped. *The Rape of Shavi* invites a new incursion into a 'de-centered', cultural and economic domination of an imaginary African territory and exhibits significant negative effects endured by an outsider 'Other'. As Singeh points out "it is a sheer irony that the primitive people of Shavi, who are absolutely estranged from the outside world, are democratic and benevolent in their way of life even without an access to Western modernity and globalization" (Singh). Their intentions and behaviors regarding the European visitors are honest and selfless. In *The Rape of Shavi*, through queen Shoshovi Emecheta gives the message to the Black as well as the white man that the Black woman is not just an object to satisfy the other gender but rather a force that can save worlds. To give her protagonists power and identity, she uses Afrofuturism to denounce the western colonization as well female oppression. Shoshovi the female protagonist knows that in order to save the women she must change this viewpoint in the men of her society and does this by taking the role of the leader in the society and at the end gathers the women and in the absence of men who are either killed or escaped from the land saves the children from death and starts the rebuilding process of their destroyed territory. Emecheta wants Nigerian the women to become more self-confident, literate, and determined, just like Shoshovi does or may be even herself, and achieves this aim by going against the norm and giving a primitive traditional woman the role of an outspoken leader. In *Shavi*, Emecheta is representing women whose identities go through many changes due to aliens who in the name of industrialization and civilization rape and destroy them. By this narration, Emecheta demonstrates that even manhood of any man is dependent on strong women around him.

In *The Rape of Shavi*, what is more evident than the other aspects are also the goal of using the concept of Womanism to include using everyday people like Shoshovi to solve problems, ending all forms of oppression for all people, reinstating the equilibrium between people and nature, and reconnecting humans with the spirit realm. By using Womanism theories, Emecheta examines intergenerational survival strategies used to achieve and maintain balance among people, nature, and the spiritual world. In Shoshovi's character, survival strategies including mothering, dialoguing, using mutual aid/self-help, and spirituality as a means for solving the societies many problems and concerns are used. Socialization



As another strategy constitutes the indirect and direct messages transmitted from one generation to the next that contribute to identity formation of the primitive people of Shavi.

Identity Construction in *Kindred*

As an Afrofuturist scholar and theoretician, Womack (2013: 9) believes that “Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (Womack, 2013). Butler has combined these elements to expose what slavery has done to generations of black people and how they have tried to survive these alienating feelings and atrocities. As will be seen in the following sections, in *Kindred* Butler tries to reshape the black identity by going back to the antebellum south and times of slavery and reshape the image that the history depicted of the black person.

Kaplan (2021) asserts that Octavia Butler in *Kindred*, finds a sense of autonomy which helps her to form alternative possible paths for the past, present, and future (KAPLAN, 2021). Elia names Octavia Butler as a writer who “used technology to comment on the experiences of black people, to allow them to have more power to modify their present condition in order to imagine a different future”(Elia, 2014). In Elia’s words Butler narrated a world that people eventually survived the catastrophes and regained their lost and denied identities (Elia).

Kindred begins and ends in mystery (Butler, 2004). Dana is the narrator and heroine of the novel. On June 9, 1976, on her twenty-sixth birthday, Dana, an educated, Black writer from Los Angeles and married to a white man named Kevin Franklin feels a sense of nausea or hallucination while unpacking cartons in her new home and suddenly finds herself in a strange new place near a river. As the story unfolds, the reader realizes that Dana the protagonist has traveled to the past to meet her ancestors “Rufus” a white slave holder, and Alice, an African American slave. As the story unfolds, the reader realizes that the character goes through a fragmentation of mind as well as body and in this way a new identity is shaped for her, because she experiences “an addition of physical fragmentation through amputation along with the feeling of displacement”. Lacan has a notion of the fragmented body. According to him, these kinds of bodies imply the actual fragmented nature of human identity. He asserts that “wholeness is in fact a hallucination, a developmental fiction” (1995: 130). Therefore, Butler makes a point of showing the reader that by completing her quest, Dana the black protagonist, after going through the slavery time of antebellum south successfully returns back to her home in 1976, but she is a changed person both in literal and figurative ways. Butler also by including the final incident of attempted rape and murder forms a connection between past and the present. In *Kindred*, by using science fiction and or grim fiction, Butler openly condemns slavery: even more, as she puts it, “I was trying to get people to feel slavery”(Elia, 2014).

To make her point what better way of showing the atrocities than time travel which is perfectly appropriate to make the reader experience tangibly through the eyes of Dana the evils of what it feels like being treated like a slave. The fact that an impossible occurrence such as time travel could illogically happen to anyone intensifies the reader’s sense of identification with Dana, who lives a terrifying experience powerfully described by Butler. Dana’s identity as a writer is just as important to her as her identity as a wife. She finds that while there are things she can’t share with her husband Kevin, there is



nothing she can't write about, and she promises herself to talk and write about this time in history and not forget it. In other words, the remembering of the history in *Kindred* is done by Dana, when she goes back and experiences the life of the slaves as well as the slave owners has a dual effect: the first one, it is a first-hand account of slavery and past and second, the reader gets to read and experience this story and is reminded of the past including the individual people and society. Just at the right time, Butler reminds the readers that the United States has a dark past that should not be forgotten. It shows that not all historical events are of equal importance, especially not to different people. In the end, it is of utmost importance to note that as there are many symbols in *Kindred* which not only symbolize the ruthless south but also the slavery's impact on people, Butler illustrates these symbols so vividly that the reader cannot help but hate the slavery and how it changed not only the identity of the black people but also the white people as well.

El-Diwany (2020), on the other hand, believes that Butler has challenged the stereotypes and questioned Euro-centric representations by offering possible, alternative futures, through science fiction. She contends that science fiction, as a literary genre, provides not only a redeeming escape for the African-American identity but also a secure refuge, in an age of widespread scientific ventures and extensive technological advancements (Khalil Mostafa El-Diwany, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHES

Since the 1970s a considerable contribution was made by the African American women writers in the field of literature (Imen & Fella, 2020) and as Gates notes this literary movement became "a distinct period in Afro-American literary history" (Gates, 1990). In the works analyzed in this study we clearly see traces of the womanist roles. In *The Rape of Shavi*, the role of mothers and grandmothers in helping young women gain a new identity is evident, while in *Kindred* and *Binti*, mothers are in effect voiceless and mute and have no roles in helping their daughters reach their aspirations. Barr, cited in Roberts, states that by the efforts of these black female writers the whiteness of science fiction has changed to include a more diverse body of literature and feminists in turn have entered the male-centered world of science fiction and black women, in particular, "who are alien in relation to patriarchal society," have attempted to change the perception of the alien (Roberts, 2002). The most prominent aspect of the named narratives is the fact that, according to black writers' views, race and gender are considered as identity construct in which different people are seen as the other by the "better" race or gender; in this case, the black race and the black woman.

In this regard, Emecheta, Butler and Okorafor along with other black artists refuse to portray their black heroes as victims, who are always traumatized and injured; so, speculative fiction is utilized to convey their womanist message of voice and identity and empowering their characters. The writers refuse to portray their black heroes as victims, who are always traumatized and injured. By using speculative fiction to convey their womanist message of voice and identity, they empower them. The novels thus reveal the ways in which female diasporic individuals challenge their dominated positions, while simultaneously challenging dominant narratives of authority, retrieving denounce African spirituality and traditions as sources of genuine power and knowledge instead. Moreover, the novels develop a framework of ethics, connection, and reliability, which gives them more humanely harmony.



The black female writers slowly but forcefully give their female protagonists identity and voice and are authentic, representative 'voice' of 'African' womanhood. To sum up, the novels discussed in this review article could be read as a metaphor for modern society (Seow, 2022), since the stories provide the reader with significant and believable situations and act as a means of expression to explore, transform their identities and gain resistance not only for young Black females, but all the girls who have been marginalized by their societies and are after independence and voice.

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Biodata

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